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ABSTRACT

The novel "The Women's Room," by Marilyn French, deserves an audience both because of the timely feminist issues it addresses and because of its formal experimentation with points of view. An interpretive theatre version of the story was performed twice in 1982-83, using a script adapted from the novel, and a modified chamber theatre format (based on oral interpretation/interpreters theatre). Three actors played Mira, the main character, in terms of her emotional side, her intellectual side, and her past self. Another actor read the parts of men in Mira's life, and a fifth portrayed the women in her life. The script stressed narration over dialogue, and contained the parts of the novel that focused on two themes; how popular culture shapes the women's character, and that society values women primarily to the extent that they are legitimized by males. Because interpretive theatre demands imagination from the audience, the sets were simple. Two rear projection screens showed slides at various points to establish cultural contexts for the narration and dialogue, and to show how popular culture affect sex roles. Repetition was used to strengthen the slide images. Other themes that tied the production together were the color red, and roses. This presentation of live performance linked with mass media demonstrated aesthetically the interconnectedness of personal, political, and cultural elements. (Two pages of notes are appended.) (SKC)

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# The Women's Room:

## An Experimental Mixed Media Production

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The Women's Room:

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## Abstract

The essay reports on two oral interpretation performances of Marilyn French's The Women's Room. The novel seemed particularly well suited to a "chamber theatre" approach, but French's unusual use of point of view presented special problems in script development and staging. Use of slides and recorded sound highlighted media-related themes from the novel and allowed the director to locate the theatrical event within the context of a sexist and repressive media culture.

## The Women's Room:

## An Experimental Mixed Media Production

The debate about what it means to be a woman, and what it should mean, informs much of the popular literature of recent years. The Women's Room, a controversial novel by Marilyn French, is a central work of fiction on this topic.[1] Reviewers were in sharp disagreement as to the novel's merit, some hailing The Women's Room as the major novel of the feminist movement, others calling it an amateurish work long on polemics and short on technique.[2]

Regardless of its polemics and occasional awkward pasages, The Women's Room deserves an audience both because of the timely issues it addresses and because of its formal experimentation with point of view. These were among the reasons which prompted us to stage an interpretive theatre performance of the novel at the 1982 Women's Festival at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and again, with revisions, at the 1983 convention of the Speech Communication Association in Washington, D.C. The unique properties of the novel lent themselves to experimentation, including the use of: 1) two narrators; 2) three cast members to represent one character; 3) a vibrant color in abundance; and 4) sight and sound media to complement the spoken text.

### The Script

Our script was an original adaptation authorized by Marilyn French. The Women's Room is a narrative recollection. The treatment of point

of view in the novel suggested a modified chamber theatre format for the adaptation. Chamber theatre is one of several branches of the art form known variously as oral interpretation or interpreters theatre. Oral interpretation is the art of reciting literature (in this case, prose fiction) directly to an audience. Chamber theatre uses an ensemble of readers/interpreters, at least one of whom acts as a narrator.[3] In French's novel, the implied author is Mira, an English professor trying to order the events of her past and understand her life. As Mira remembers, it becomes clear that she no longer has the same identity or self-concept that she once had. Our script responds to this separation by using three women interpreters to represent Mira: one as Mira from the past, and two narrators (rather than the standard single narrator) to represent the present "author" Mira.[4] Narrator One portrays the intellectual Mira, and Narrator Two the emotional Mira. The third Mira, that of the past, is no more, except in memory, having changed through experience and the passage of time. When that bygone Mira speaks, it is through Reader Three. The narrators argue and explain, and in this intrapersonal conversation the Miras conjure up events from the past in which the final two ensemble members represent people Mira has known. Reader Four speaks primarily for Mira's husband Norm and lover Ben. Reader Five portrays Mira's mother, mother-in-law, and friends. Division of lines resulted in a fairly even distribution among the performers, although the narrators are the channel through which the audience receives a large part of Mira's story.

The present Mira's estrangement from her past self is introduced in the very first pages of the novel. The narrators remember the past self cowering alone in a public rest room, feeling ill at ease and out of place and peering anxiously into a mirror in search of her image.[5]

Mira's view of her self has become fragmented and unfamiliar. This introductory scene establishes the theme of search and analysis. Walking along a public beach, still alone, the narrator explains, "I can't see ahead yet, only backward. I leave it to you to decide Mira's sanity."[6] The present story is an older Mira's introspective recall, highly selective, subjective, and confused. She relates:

> My head is full of voices. . . . I will write it all down, go back as far as I have to, and try to make some sense out of it. But I'm not a writer. . . . The best I can do is put down bits and pieces, fragments of time, fragments of lives. I am going to try to let the voices out.[7]

The rest of the novel is Mira's attempt to exorcise the voices.

Occasionally all five performers interact, and these scenes have blocked movement. In these exchanges, the narrators shed their normal roles and, together with Readers Four and Five, enter a specific time and place in the life of the past Mira (Reader Three). Thus, Readers One and Two sometimes lyrically express Mira's thoughts for the audience, sometimes observe or address the other readers, sometimes step outside the conventional limits of narration to become "participant observers." As the script ends, Readers One, Two, and Three merge existentially at a common time and place. The present finishes reconstructing the past, the past catches up with the present. The cathartic journey is completed, and the crisis of memory is resolved.

An interpretive theatre script must be limited in scope, and cutting the novel meant focusing on central themes and eliminating many of Mira's experiences and relationships. Mira's character is a modern day Everywoman

of the middle class. Her story parallels in expectation and pattern, if not in specific events, the life story of many American women following World War II. As role models, Mira's mother and teachers taught her to behave as a "little lady." Mira was a child and adolescent during the Golden Age of Hollywood, and she was influenced by movie stars and news stories about prominent personalities. Later, women's magazines gave her instructions as to which behaviors were proper for a woman, wife, and mother. The role of popular culture in shaping Mira's character is reflected in the script and extensive use of slides and sound.

As an adult, life happens to Mira--she doesn't take the initiative. She sees herself as a victim, passive, controlled, and accountable for making others' lives pleasant. She is "overcome by Fate," even though she has conformed and assumed the traditional wife and mother role prescribed for women of her generation. Mira ("mirror" of women of her generation) marries Norm the doctor ("norm") as she is "supposed to." But she comes to realize that no matter how organized and diligent a homemaker she is, it is her physician husband who is in control, who has power, prestige, and possession of "his house" and "his wife." And commitment and propriety are not enough. Mira loses her role and her identity when Norm demands a divorce. Adjusting to her midlife crisis, Mira returns to college and seeks a new career. This time, in her independence, she meets a new conflict. She is forced to choose between pursuing her professional goal and keeping her lover Ben by becoming once again a wife and mother as she formerly had "been" (Ben).

A theme that unites the story is that society values women primarily to the extent that they are legitimized by, or identified with, a male. Young Mira marries Norm rather than risk remaining single in a patriarchal

society which sanctions married women but not unmarried ones. At the end of the story, at least two decades later, Norm and Ben both have wives and successful careers. Mira is an unmarried professor, unable to gain the same social and professional recognition and status that Norm and Ben enjoy. Mira and her female friends may realize and respect the importance of homemaking, or being female professors, but society doesn't seem to. There is little confort in the realization that men, including Norm and Ben, operate from conditioning rather than out of deliberate meanness or vindictiveness toward women. As Mira's friend Val comments, "They can't help it; they're trained to be bastards. We're trained to be angels so they can be bastards. Can't beat the system."[8] So as to avoid portraying men as unidimensional villains, we included passages from the novel that deal with what it is like to be male, to illustrate that men are products of the socialization process just as women are.

French's forte is constructing reasoned arguments, and these dominate the novel. Most had to be left out of the performance script as they included extended monologues or lengthy consciousness raising interchanges between characters. Another reason why we used a great deal of narration is that the book suffers from a lack of believable conversational dialogue. Unlike the ABC television dramatization, our reading script was a cutting of the novel. Preservation of the integrity and authenticity of the literature was a primary goal, and no doubt a crucial factor in securing the author's permission for the performance. In summary, the adaptation was a judicious cutting and arranging of the author's original text.

Narration was stressed over dialogue, as it was in the novel, with our narrators' perspectives serving roughly as the novelist's perspective. Narrative continuity and chronological development were considered essential

for a coherent performance script, especially with multiple readers representing Mira. This was a challenge to achieve because linear progression was sometimes lacking in the novel as Mira's memories were interrupted by pages of philosophical comments and flashbacks. Dramatic tension was produced by emphasizing conflict both between and within characters. The audience was encouraged to identify and empathize with the characters through the script's examination of their mundane existence and the contemporary confusion over identities, roles, and mores.

## Staging

Director Robert Breen describes chamber theatre as a technique for presenting narrative literature on stage without sacrificing the narrative element, while at the same time taking advantage of theatrical devices such as costumes, lighting, and set.[9] Since interpreters theatre is not as representational as conventional theatre is, it makes greater demands on the imagination of the audience. Overall, the interpreters theatre aesthetic allows the audience to participate co-creatively in the staged experience. The narrators' direct contact with the audience and the limited direct involvement and eye contact between characters continuously creates intimacy while undermining illusions of realism. Alternating past tense narration with present tense dialogue creates additional distance between the audience and the fictional events.

Our set was simple--a grouping of traditional readers theatre stools arranged on a black draped stage (most of the drapes were eliminated for the show in Washington). Three of the stools were arranged in a semicircle on a 9" high platform. The other two stools were located on the stage

floor at the downstage right and left corners of the platform. The two narrators sat on these lower stools at the ends of the semicircle of higher stools (to preserve this effect in the Washington presentation, where no platform was available, the two narrators' stools were shorter than the other readers' stools). As the "authors" of the story, the narrators were situated closest to the audience. The other three readers represented memories and were in the literal and figurative background. Reader Three, the remembered Mira, was in the middle of the back row, forming a triangle with Narrators One and Two. The seating arrangement provided depth and led the audience's eyes into the "past."

Although the lines were memorized, each of the narrators or "authors" held a black, bound script. The traditional readers theatre notebooks reminded the audience they were witnessing oral interpretation of literature and also represented the book as Mira was composing it. The narrators referred visually to the scripts on occasion, but never read from them. Page turning marked progress through the story and provided transitions from one scene to another. Narrators put the notebooks down, freeing their hands for gestures, when they dropped the narrator voice and assumed the role of another character in the story at various points. The other three performers did not use scripts at any time. When narrating, the interpreters remained seated at their stools. When engaged in dialogue from the past, either readers remained seated and shifted focus on stage, or action was blocked and took place on other stage areas. For example, for one scene taking place over a meal, the interpreters turned inward and mimed eating, drinking, pouring coffee, etc., while reciting their lines. This slight shift toward a more representational format provided

punctuation and resulted in lively and believable exchanges of recalled dialogue.

To the right and left of the semicircle of stools, and slightly downstage, were two rear projection screens (suspended from the grid and framed by drapes in St. Louis, and mounted in flats in Washington). The screens' position reinforced the triangle effect. The eye was led inward, at times magnetically pulled away to view the screens, but always directed back to the heart of the stage, the readers.

Slides were used at a number of points in the show, usually to establish a cultural context (through magazine ads, news photographs, special effects, etc.) for the narration and dialogue. The pictures were not projected scenery (which would have served a representational function), but rather an additional choric device addressed directly to the audience. Since one of the main points of the book is that popular culture is a major influence on sex roles, our projection screens were rich with symbolic associations. One of the most obvious was television (the everpresent screen in our lives). A television screen is a picture frame or window through which audiences experience vicariously and in safety both the presentation and representation of reality. TV paradoxically involves and alienates at the same time by appealing to the senses while simultaneously imposing its rigid frame over perception.[10] One looks through such a frame or "window" and enjoys the imagery while being aware of the chasm between what is displayed and one's own immediate universe. Television viewers are conditioned to this paradox. Here and now becomes there and then. In The Women's Room, the use of screens and slides provided a metaphorical buffer between the audience-as-voyeurs and the script's

sometimes painfully intimate diary format. Thus, visual effects were used selectively to season emotional intensity.

Slides and sound were used in interaction with narration to stimulate personalized responses in the audience members.[11] For example, the narrators explain that Mira began life as an adventuresome and independent child. Through childhood and adolescence she is socialized to be submissive and compliant. While Bing Crosby croons "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby" in the background, a series of slides shows a toddler being carefree, then strapped into a potty chair, choking a puppy, and finally dressed in her mother's clothes and playing make believe with another girl. The slide changes are strategically timed to the narrators' lines. The snapshots in this scene are neither actual pictures of Mira's life nor precise illustrations of the words in the script. They are obviously from a family photograph album of the period in which Mira lived, and viewers can replay in their minds the music, family photos, and other popular culture from their own or their parents' lives in the 1930s.

Repetition of similar images established continuity. Visions of glorified motherhood recur along with slides of classic Madonna paintings. In sharp contrast with these are representative views of contemporary family scenes, dining rooms, and kitchens. Juxtaposing a Lautrec painting on one screen and a similar looking publicity photo of Marilyn Monroe on the other asserts an ideological link between depictions of women in high culture and popular culture. A famous production still of Marilyn Monroe in The Seven Year Itch was shown in fragments simultaneously on both screens, parodying the tendency in modern advertising to objectify women's body parts in order to sell products.

Slides were also used to comment on other social issues. Telephoto shots of post-war tract housing developments, similar looking shots of beehives and wasp nests, a herd of sheep, and a rat in a Skinner box were some of the slides we used to accompany Pete Seeger's recording of "Little Boxes," portions of which interrupted the narration at three points. An eerie, extremely tight blow-up of the famous Kent State news photo was used as a flashforward to foreshadow the 1970 tragedy and to set up a subsequent 15-slide sequence of fast dissolves "zooming in" on the anguished survivor's face. The zoom in continues until the patterns of light and dark become abstractions, no longer recognizable as a face, thus defamiliarizing a famous image and asking the audience to feel with reawakened intensity the horror of that moment.

Besides the media and popular culture, several other motifs were used to tie the production together. The most important was the color red. The Women's Room is a modern story and could be presented with readers dressed in current fashions. However, the story spans several decades, and there is a timelessness to its account of the conflicts between men and women, parents and children, individuals' aspirations and socially imposed roles. To suggest timelessness, the four female readers wore floor-length dresses made of a soft, flowing fabric in four slightly different shades of red. The hue of these costumes did not overpower or tire the eye, but did contrast sharply with the navy blue blazer, light blue turtleneck sweater, and white trousers worn by the male reader. Overall, the women's costumes suggested a Greek chorus, universality, Mira's subjectivity, and tension between pairs of opposing forces (men/women, the modern/the eternal, etc.).

The color red itself implies many things. Red is the color of woman; the color of blood and birth; of Hollywood inspired, sexually arousing lipsticked mouths and polished nails. Red is the color of anger, revolution, and murder--and The Women's Room is very much concerned with Mira's personal anger and her indignation over Kent State, My Lai, riots, protests, and political assassinations. We made heavy use of red in slides in order to take advantage of its symbolism and to provide a color link between the screens and the playing area. Red is the color of roses, another motif in itself. Roses are presented to women on all sorts of occasions to express affection or pay tribute. Bouquets of red roses are sent to new mothers, or placed in the arms of beauty contest winners and other celebrities. With slides, we illustrated the irony that roses also represent sorrow. Indelibly linked with memories of John Kennedy's assassination are Jackie Kennedy's bloodstained pink suit and crushed, red rose bouquet.

## Conclusion

Guided by the novel, we were able to be experimental in our staged presentation of the text. Because of the book's introspective, subjective viewpoint, the narration by an implied author, and the scarcity of dialogue, we used a hybrid of chamber theatre and traditional readers theatre. Our production emphasized issues addressed by French and developed media themes inherent in the novel. By presenting mass media in the context of live performance, we demonstrated aesthetically the interconnectedness of the personal, political, and cultural. Remaining true to the literature,

we broke some "rules" in the performance, with the thought that in this situation it was good to be innovative but not to be intrusive.

Although Mira's story is highly personal, it is representative of many women's experiences. Besides the basic story--Mira's struggle for survival and self-awareness--the novel is rich in passages that could be used for other topical scripts. Two incidents of rape might be included in a program on sex and violence. Mira's acquaintance with a lesbian couple and a gay student at Harvard would be appropriate material for a production on the topic of homosexuality in literature. While we attempted to be faithful in our adaptation of the novel, there was much we could not cover. The book is filled with fresh material for future adaptations.

Notes

[1]Marilyn French, The Women's Room (New York: Summit Books, 1977).

[2]Collected reviews of The Women's Room are found in Contemporary Literary Criticism, 10 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1979), pp. 191-192; and Contemporary Authors (Detroit: Gale Research, 1981), pp. 213-215.

[3]If there is no narrator, the production is an example of "readers theatre." Chamber theatre was developed by Robert Breen. For an explanation of the taxonomy and aesthetics of readers theatre and chamber theatre, see Robert Breen, Chamber Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978); Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook, 3rd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1981); Marion L. Kleinau and Janet Larsen McHughes, Theatres for Literature (Sherman Oaks, CA: Alfred, 1980); Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, and Phyllis Reinstra Jeffrey, Group Performances of Literature (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Joanna Hawkins Maclay, Readers Theatre (New York: Random House, 1971); Lynn Christine Miller, "The Subjective Camera and Staging Psychological Fiction," Literature in Performance, 2, No. 2 (April 1982), 35-42; Alan Wade, "From Text to Television," Literature in Performance, 2, No. 2 (April 1982), 23-34; and Sammie Ann Wicks, "Music, Meaning, and the Adaptation of Literature," Literature in Performance, 2, No. 1 (November 1980), 89-97.

[4]For a discussion of multiple narrators and chorus form, see Lea G. Queener, "Character and Chorus: Figure-Ground Relations in Chamber Theatre," Literature in Performance, 1, No. 2 (April 1981), 83-93.

[5]For a discussion of mirrors as a literary device, see Breen, Chamber Theatre, pp. 10-13.

[6]French, The Women's Room, p. 11.

[7]Ibid., pp. 14-15.

[8]Ibid., p. 245.

[9]Robert Breen, "Chamber Theatre and the Dramatization of Narrative," Oral English, 2, No. 4 (Fall 1976), 1-12.

[10]The best known theory of media and involvement is McLuhan's. See Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). For an application of McLuhan's ideas to oral interpretation see Leland H. Roloff, The Perception and Evocation of Literature (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1973).

[11]For a discussion of the use of audio-visual effects in combination with live action, see Gary Burns and Elizabeth Kizer, "Multi-Image and Live Performance: Some Connections," Multi-Images, 11, No. 1 (Winter 1985), 23-24.